compete in order to hold down prices. But aluminum is a big, well-oiled machine and is very well-entrenched."

Talk to a representative of a steel-sheet supplier, though, and you leave with the feeling that steel may be poised to give aluminum a run for its money. The spokesman touted his material's biodegradability—a concept that is strange but true. He boasted of the lightweighting that has already been done and the fact that steel beverage cans are inherently stronger than aluminum cans of comparable thickness. He concluded his comments with this prediction: "There will be 50 per cent more steel beverage can lines on stream at the end of 1988 than there were in the fourth quarter of 1987."

Plastic has not yet found domestic use as a packaging material for single-serve beer. One big brewer, however, has introduced a plastic "Party Ball" complete with a spigot and an ice-containing wraparound carton. This spherical container, like those previously used by other brewers and a wine company, is in essence a disposable keg.

Bigger multipacks

Multipacks of diverse sizes let bottlers alter product quantities without changing their primary packages. Though the 12-can pack still has not reached maturity, 15s are being introduced, as are 16s, 18s, 20s, and 24s. Multipacks containing 30 and even 36 cans may not be far away. These big multipacks present a bigger "billboard" in the store—important because as much as two-thirds of all soft-drink sales are impulse buys.

Bottlers who use glass have not done anywhere near this much experimenting with multipacks. But one industry executive said he expected to see an increasing number of 12 packs of glass bottles. One such package is already available for beer.

Among bottlers contacted for PACKAGING's 1988 Materials Survey, only 38.5 per cent of the current users of metal closures said they expected to use more of them in 1989; 62.5 per cent of the users of plastic closures said they planned to use more.

A representative of a manufacturer of both types said that the plastic closure now accounts for 30 per cent of the total soft-drink container market—an eight-point jump since a year ago. Some industry-sponsored consumer surveys have shown a 14-to-1 preference for plastic over aluminum.

A shortage of closures made of both materials is now a concern throughout the soft-drink industry. One supplier blames the bottlers. "When bottlers are ready to make a packaging change," he said, "the first thing they do is go to the glass people, to PET, to cans, labels, and cartons and say, 'We're ready to make a change. Can you support it?' They don't come to the closure people because there has always been an overcapacity." Now that has changed. Manufacturer consolidation, indecision regarding the switch from aluminum to plastic and from heat-shrink plastic to mechanical plastic, plus high growth in single-serve container sizes have contributed to the closure crunch.

Aseptics for adults

Despite double-digit sales growth for each of the past two years, the aseptic "brick" beverage package continues to be perceived by consumers as something meant for kids. In fact, the demographics are shifting toward older consumers. According to one major supplier of this type of container, here is how sales break down by age groups:

In 1985, consumer users of the aseptic package under six years old represented 20 per cent of the total; 6-12 years, 42 per cent; 13-17 years, 9 per cent; 18 or older, 29 per cent. In 1986 the numbers were 6 and under, 16 per cent; 6-12 years, 32 per cent; 13-17 years, 12 per cent, and 18 or older, 40 per cent. Recent FDA approval of aspartame in aseptics is seen as an excellent opportunity for makers of this package to grab a greater share of the adult diet-drink market. Aseptics in adult-portion 12-ounce sizes are being introduced regularly.

Another new development in the aseptic field is the debut of paperboard cartons containing nine and 12 bricks in the 8.45-ounce size. ■

Additional information about containers and closures used by the beverage industry is published in PACKAGING's Encyclopedia.

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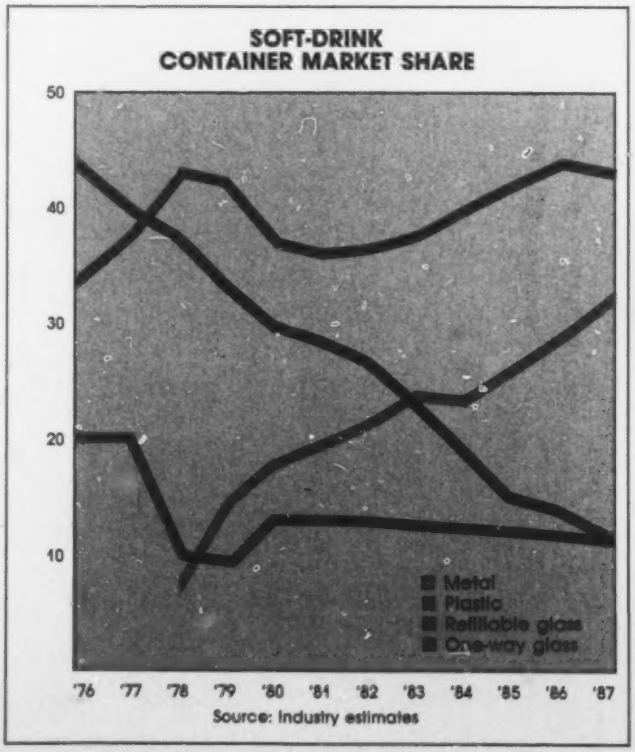
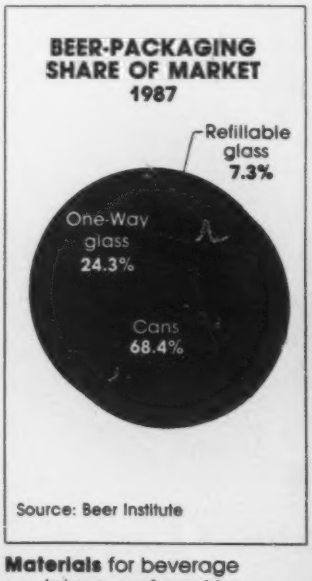
GREG ERICKSON
Senior Editor

"The beverage industry is experiencing tremendous pressure to keep up with consumers' changing tastes while not cutting its profit margins. It's a matter of working creatively within some very strict guidelines."





Materials for beverage containers preferred by consumers, facing page, vary by beverage. Soft-drink trends since 1976 show refillable glass steadily losing share as plastic zooms upward.